WHEREVER YOU GO

June 21, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Genesis 28:10-17
Matthew 10:24-33

"Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,..."
--Genesis 28:15a(RSV)

Gene Siskel wrote recently about Academy Award winning Marlee Matlin, who played the angry young deaf woman in "Children of a Lesser God." Matlin is Jewish. The interviewer asked if she was a believer: specifically, "did she believe in a God who could allow an 18 month old baby to become deaf?" The actress, who is deaf herself, answered by way of signing and a sign interpreter: "Yes, I believe in a greater being, and a God that answers prayers, maybe not every prayer. Because if I hadn't lost my hearing, I wouldn't be talking to you now. I wouldn't be going to the Academy Awards..." Siskel wrote that, "Her eyes glowed as she signed her life-affirming answer." [See Context, 6/15/87, Chicago Tribune]

It is not possible, I find, to live in 1987, with eyes and ears and mind open to the world and not confront the issue of God. It is what we talk about. It is what we care about ultimately and finally...

Is there a God?... but it's not really an abstract, academic matter... The simple existence or non-existence of a supreme being is not the issue. The issue is - is there a God who matters? Is there a God whose existence has anything to do with human life and human destiny; with babies who become deaf, with life in all its tragedy and joy, its agony and its ecstasy? The question is posed, I find, in much of the serious literature and poetry and drama and art and cinema of our culture. One of the places where serious theologizing occurs with great consistency I find, is the Entertainment and Leisure section of the Sunday New York Times, followed closely by the Book Reviews... Weekly, you will find there documentation of our compulsion... Is there a God who matters?... so much so that I think sometimes the definition of serious art, literature and poetry, is that it deals with the issue.

It is there in the preaching task to which thousands of us put ourselves each week. A pillar of the church, not this one by the way, was asked once what she thought of the new seminary graduate as a preacher. "I suppose what he says is true" the elderly woman replied, "but I can't see that it matters much." To each sermon the preacher must always ask that most ruthless but most honest of questions - "So what? Does it matter?" And our greatest challenge and highest calling is to testify, to bear witness, that it does matter very much - to us.

I would venture to guess, it is a question you have asked and with

which you struggle in moments of integrity and deep searching. Does God exist - and - does it matter? Does it have anything to do with me, my life, my relationships and hopes and joys and sorrows, and my future, my family, my job, my dreams?

It is the subject of one of our oldest and best stories from back on the very edge of recorded history. This is a pre-Israel story, the scholars tell us. No one was around to write it down so it was handed down across many, many generations of tribal history. It is one of the formative stories of Israel - and of Christianity. It is an elemental story about elemental, basic things. We heard just a small piece of it in the lesson this morning - and now I'd like to engage in the luxury of telling it more fully. It is the story of Jacob who will - in the interest of continuity and perhaps even persuading you to return next Sunday, at 11:00 - wrestle with an angel...

This morning Jacob is on the run, and well he should be. He was one of two sons, twins actually, of Rebekah and Isaac. Esau was born first, he was the elder of the two. Jacob was younger, fairer and a lot more street-wise, if not smarter. Esau was a hunter, his father's favorite. Jacob "dwelt in tents," and his mother was partial to him. One day Esau came in from a hard day in the field famished and found Jacob cooking pottage. Did you ever hear that story - as a child in Sunday School and wonder what pottage was and think that the story-teller had really meant to say porridge? I confess that I did and that I've always wondered how Esau could possibly have been stirred to such monumental extravagance as to trade his inheritance for a bowl of Cream of Wheat? And so I was delighted and relieved to discover - after many years of ignorance that pottage actually was a "thick vegetable soup, usually made with lentils but also with herbs. Occasionally meat was added, and the whole was boiled." [Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible.]

Now, maybe that doesn't do much for you on a sweltering June 21 in Chicago, but it evokes a strong memory for me. My father was a railroader: he worked 24 hours and was home 24 hours. On his day at home he would frequently make vegetable soup, all day long, cutting, chopping, seasoning and tasting. After delivering newspapers in the Pennsylvania snow, which I remember being at least ten feet deep, the aroma of the soup simmering on the stove when I hit the back door was stunning. It is forever burned into my olfactory recall system. It is an aroma that means welcome, safety, warmth, love, you're home!

And so when I learned it was not just Cream of Wheat, Esau became more understandable.

In any event Jacob's character begins to emerge when Easu, famished, intoxicated with the aroma of the vegetable soup, says something like "Jacob, I'd do anything for a bowl of that soup," and Jacob says - "all right. How about your birthright? Give me your birthright and you got your pottage." And Esau was so hungry he agreed. Maybe he didn't think Jacob was serious. Brothers do that sort of thing all the time; wager one dollar, five, ten, or $100 on who was on the mound when Aaron hit number 715 - and never hold one another to it. Maybe it didn't seem important. Maybe he simply allowed his stomach to think for him which explains why Jacob, and not Esau, is one of the Patriarchs whose name helps us define

God - as in "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

What comes next is worse. Ancient people believed that a death-bed blessing, like a curse, released a power which determined the character and destiny of the recipient and once released, could not be retracted. Isaac felt that the time was near for the blessing, the act in which the mantle of leadership and, more important, the promise of God would be handed to his heir, his first born son, Esau. In a scene which begins a poignant drama and one of the worst scams in all of literature, old Isaac, now blind, tells Esau to go hunting and prepare his favorite stew so they can eat and drink some wine together, one last time, and the blessing will be conveyed.

Rebekah, Isaac's wife, overhears and acts quickly and deceptively on behalf of Jacob, her favorite. She prepares old Isaac's favorite lamb stew, instructing Jacob to assist (and who could make it better?), concocts an elaborate disguise for Jacob so his arms would feel hairy to Isaac, as Esau's arms would, and he would even smell like Esau. It worked. It's a great and poignant drama... Old Isaac senses that something is not right. He keeps asking for reassurance - "the lamb stew is wonderful, just the way I love it, but there's something peculiar about your voice today, Esau. Here, let me touch you - smell you." And so Isaac blesses Jacob instead of Esau and because it is an irretractable blessing has to break the news to Esau when he returns with his father's favorite stew to receive what is rightfully his. And the Genesis writer, with magnificent literary control, says simply, "Now Esau hated his brother." He planned to kill him, as a matter of fact; announced his intent to anyone who would listen... "The day my father dies, my brother is a dead man."

Enter Rebekah, again, - interceding for Jacob, making up a story about the lack of marriageable women in the neighborhood, and actually managing to manipulate it so that Isaac sends Jacob away to Rebekah's old home to look for a wife, safe, away from the smoldering rage of Esau.

That's the situation and you really have to know all that in order to get the impact of what happens next. Jacob is on the run, in exile actually, banished from home and family, potentially wealthy but poorer than he's ever been. If he has any conscience at all, he has to be inundated with guilt and, of course, he's frightened, scared to death. On the first day out, on the way to his uncle's place, he stops when the sun goes down, at no place in particular except that it is the place he is when the day ends, and he lays his head on a stone and falls asleep.

His dream, subject of so many camp songs, - "We are climbing Jacob's ladder..." - involved a ladder, the Hebrew is better translated a "ramp" actually: there are angels going up and down, messengers, emissaries of God. And God is in the dream and God repeats the old promise to the miserable fugitive, cut off from every important relationship he ever had, the promise about land and descendants and then throws in a few more promises, beautiful promises, promises Jacob deserves less than anyone else we have met in the story...

> "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I had spoken to you."

When Jacob awoke he made two observations, both of which are profoundly true:

"Surely the Lord is in this place," and

"I did not know it."

Whatever else Jacob was thinking about when he laid his head on a stone exhausted, it wasn't God. About that the text is very clear. Jacob had not been traveling to a holy place for refuge. He was not on a religious pilgrimage, he was running for his life. He hadn't even said his prayers. Jacob was not acting religiously. Put another way, he had made the tacit, but elemental assumption, that God was not particularly relevant to his current dilemma.

In that assumption, Jacob reflected the way his civilization thought and with remarkable consistency, the way people have continued to think about God and God's relationship to the world and here The Word begins to address us. The basic theological assumption humankind makes is that God is Holy, other, above and beyond, perfect, ineffable, infallible, and immortal. The world, on the other hand, is here and now, tangible, imperfect, flawed, fallible, and finite. If God has to do with the world: if the life of God intersects with the life of the world the intersections are special places, holy places, where things are different: where there is mystery, and a hushed, reverent silence, and where a different language is spoken and behavior is regulated by carefully choreographed rituals. The technical name for it is "cult." It is the whole elaborate system in which people get to participate in the intersection of God's life with their own life.

Jacob's civilization thought like that - and so does ours. His civilization thought at first, that God was present in extraordinary natural events - mist-shrouded mountains, earthquakes, lightening - then altars, arks, tabernacles, Temples and the Holy of Holies. Our civilization makes similar assumptions. Conrad Hyers has written a charming little book, And God Created Laughter, in which he calls ours - "Sunday-Go-To-Meeting-Religion."

"Where is God to be found? - In God's house; in the most sublime and sacred place in our lives. Here God is somehow more real and available than anywhere else, and we are certainly more presentable to God - well behaved, well dressed, well groomed, clean-shaven, amply perfumed, and recently bathed as we all are!" [Conrad Hyers, And God Created Laughter, p. 18]

The word which came to Jacob was -

"I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,..."

I am with you in this place which is no place except where you happen to be, Jacob. I am with you in exile. I am with you at a place and in a situation - from which you assume I am intentionally absent. I am with you in your terrible guilt, in your manipulative dishonesty and your cynical deception. I will keep you wherever you are Jacob, whether you know it or

not, whether you want me to or not or whether that is good news - which at the moment it is obviously not. And Jacob says something absolutely revolutionary - "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven... This 'no place,' this pit stop... on the escape route from my miserable past... The House of God!"

It was a radical suggestion. It set off centuries of tension between the Priests, who represent the Orthodox way of thinking about God and religion oriented around the Temple, religious rituals, rules and ceremonies, and the prophets, who keep suggesting that God is present in the world and attends to his people in all sorts of worldly circumstances and cares about their worldly life.

It is still a radical suggestion. We live in a society which worries a lot about secularism. A religious spokesman on television said the Supreme Court decision that "creationism" cannot be mandated in public school curriculum was a victory for "secular humanism." We worry about the declining interest in traditional religion and traditional values and the declining use of religious symbols, gestures and vocabulary in public life. We worry about religion and about our culture when you can't pray in the public school or use Christian symbolism on the City Hall lawn.

And we are so frightened by this evolution and by the persistent carping about secular humanism that, as a culture, we increase the intensity of our practice of cultic religion, religion with its own holy places, vocabulary, rituals and an insular mind set, so totally divorced from life that you can be a full participant in it by watching it on television and responding by writing a check.

The radical word of this wonderful ancient story is that peculiar word that came to Jacob - "I will be with you wherever you go,..." I am not confined to those places and times and events you have designed for me. "There is traffic between heaven and earth." [Walter Bruggemann, Genesis] There is a God who reigns above - but incredibly it is the God who is involved with the common stuff of life.

Now perhaps it occurs to you that this is an odd tack to take - here in this place which for so many, for so long, represents the sacred in the midst of the profane. We are not like the world around us. You would not mistake this place for Stanley Korshak's or Marshall Fields - or the Palm Court at the Drake. It is not uncommon for folk to walk into the solemn stillness of this place as I do in the middle of the day at least once a week, and as eyes are compelled upward by the sweeping grace of the architecture, and as sense is literally lifted by the fragmented light through the windows and if you are fortunate enough to be here when Dr. Simmons is practicing, the soaring beauty of the organ will lift your spirits as well, and you will conclude with Jacob, "Surely the Lord is in this place." It is not uncommon for people to be pulled away from blaring taxi horns and hurrying rush hour crowds, through the Cloister into the Garth to hear the music of water gently flowing and sparrows chirping in the trees and to conclude with Jacob, that the Lord is in this place. Or to receive bread and wine from the white linen-set table in a solemn ritual 2,000 years old... It might seem peculiar to hear from someone who engages in behavior as esoteric as mine, actually donning a black robe and white collar and a neck tie that preachers wore in Geneva 400 years ago - that

God doesn't need special places, rituals or behavior in order to intersect with human life.

Right religion, we believe, is intended to be a reminder, to point outward, to be a sign of a larger truth. It is not an end in itself, a privileged, exclusive sanctuary - but a reminder that God is in the world. The table of our Lord is intended to remind us that every table is sacred and that sacred things happen every time people break bread together in love. And clergy - at our best - we mean to be a reminder that each of us, all of us - has a vocation, dear to God, important to God - laity and clergy alike.

At our very best we engage in the particularities of religion precisely to remind ourselves and the world of the radical worldliness of God. At our best we remember that our Holy of Holies, that most powerfully sacred place, is not a sanctuary or altar - but a profoundly worldly place, a hill, behind the garbage dump, outside the capital city, the place where they executed criminals. God's life intersects human life in a cross, on which a beloved son died and in dying promised that there is nowhere you and I can go, ever, that is apart from God, without God's love and judgment and forgiveness and promise.

Because God is radically involved in the life of the world it is not possible to separate private religion from public life. It is the genius of Judaism: - God cares about the marketplace and not just the sanctuary. God cares about the sojourners, refugees, widows and orphans as much as God cares about personal ethics...

One of the great dangers of the flood of public discourse about morality recently is that it is so intensely private and cultic that we forget there are larger and more important ethical and religious issues of justice and equality and peace and compassion. Those are the things God cares about. In the heat and voyeuristic intensity of the embarrassing public discourse about private morality of preachers and politicians, it is possible to forget the Biblical observation that private piety is not necessarily synonymous with God's concerns for the world. God, one must conclude, on the basis of the Biblical writers, is not only concerned about who is doing what to whom privately, but also with the lack of housing for poor people in this city, and the fact that if you're poor and a minority and have the misfortune to get sick in this society you are in a lot of trouble... There is traffic between heaven and earth: the ladder ends up, not in the Holy of Holies, but in that radically worldly place where Jacob spent the night.

"Wherever you go..." God said... The question that begs to be asked is this: Is there any place where you can expect not to find God? Is there any place that is utterly God-forsaken? The answer is "no." That's what this story means and it is the deepest meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

There are personal implications. There is nowhere you can go, there is no where in your life where God is not present with redemptive possibility... If there were, it would be something like that banishment, that self-imposed exile in which Jacob found himself. Exile - banishment. Everyone of us knows about it. Jacob's story is powerful because of what

it says about God, but also because of what is says about the human condition. We may never have been as overtly deceptive as Jacob, but we know what it means to run away - to try to escape God's judgment and God's love... We know about the exile of unresolved guilt...

Guilt - because we have been dishonest and manipulative and so utterly selfish that we can hardly believe it about ourselves.

-or because we have violated a trust and cannot escape the knowledge of what we have done.

-or because we have never lived up to our potential and have always settled for less, compromised, sold out...

-or because our behavior, our lifestyle over which we have struggled and which we can now affirm with integrity - still offends the norm, and our whole existence is a sham, a charade...

-or because we are afraid, in spite of the facade we work so hard to maintain - strong, aggressive, assertive, confident - we are actually running, running scared from our own mortality, from failure, sickness, defeat, death... And the thought of the duplicity of maintaining the facade, the oppressive, moves us to quiet, private tears of despair.

The cross is the promise that God is there. God is there sometimes to judge, but always to love; sometimes to call us to account, but always to forgive; sometimes to remind us of what we could be, but always to impart strength and power and forgiveness and possibility. Only you know the topography of your own exile. It is not a matter any of us would feel comfortable sharing with anyone, even our closest confidents... Know that God is there. Hear the word of promise... God will come to be with you there. Trust that promise...

"Wherever you go" - God said to Jacob, "I will be with you and I will keep you." And Jesus of Nazareth, in the middle of his ministry one time told his friends that God knows when a sparrow falls to the ground, and that the hairs on their heads are numbered... a different but wonderful theology there, a God not confined to the places and times and ceremonies we design; a God who reigns above and uses our best religion to remind us that there is always grace and possibility and forgiveness and love in our lives; a God whose very life intersects with our life on a cross and who says to each of us - blessed words -

"Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."

O God, we praise you for times you have laid aside mystery and come to us, making of the mundane details of our lives, your Holy of Holies. We praise and adore you for pursuing us in the exiles we impose on ourselves, promising your love and your welcoming grace. We praise you for that intersection between your life and our lives which is the cross of Christ. Because of that, and under that cross, in the name of that love, we pray. Amen.